

State lawmakers' proposal to fix school funding calls for more study

Originally published January 8, 2016 at 1:07 pm Updated January 8, 2016 at 8:53 pm

Lawmakers have announced a plan for fixing the way the state pays for education, but some say it's a plan for a plan.

SECTION SPONSOR

By [DONNA BLANKINSHIP](#)

The Associated Press

After spending years debating possible ways out of the quagmire of state-education funding, lawmakers from both parties and both houses announced Friday they may have a plan to fix the way the state pays for education.

Some would call it a plan for a plan, since the proposal doesn't say how the Legislature will fix the most vexing part of the education-funding problem: overreliance on local school levies to pay for basic education.

Four years after the state Supreme Court ruled the way the state pays for education is unconstitutional, the Washington Legislature is still debating how to respond to the court. It is working under a contempt order and a daily \$100,000 fine until it finishes responding to the so-called McCleary decision.

Lawmakers have added more than \$2 billion to the state's education budget — setting aside more money for all-day kindergarten, smaller classes in the younger grades, pupil transportation and classroom supplies and equipment. But they've left the most complex challenge for last.

The proposed bill that was supposed to address the state's overreliance on local levies promises a solution, but not until the 2017 legislative session.

Here is the plan, which is likely to change during debates in both houses:

- It establishes a new task force to continue the work of the bipartisan group of lawmakers who have been meeting since the 2015 legislative session.
- It demands data from the school districts on how they use their local levy money, so lawmakers can figure out how much is going toward basic education.
- It sets aside money for analysis of that data.
- And it makes a one-sentence commitment toward figuring out a way to do something about levies next year.

“It is taking more time than I would like,” acknowledged House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington. “The fact is there is more work that needs to be done.”

Another member of the bipartisan group that worked on the bill, Sen. Ann Rivers, R-La Center, said the bill offers a framework that lawmakers can work with.

“We have to stop thinking about a silver-bullet approach to funding education,” she said. “What you’re going to see is a multifaceted approach.”

Rep. Chad Magendanz, R-Issaquah, said the group has been meeting for more than a year to try to figure that out, but so far it hasn’t agreed on how much money it needs to find.

“We’ve been guessing up until now,” Magendanz said Thursday during The Associated Press Legislative Preview.

Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island, said she and other Democrats don’t even agree with the Republicans on whether they have a number in mind.

“A lot of us agree a base level is \$3.5 billion,” she said Thursday. She acknowledged, however, that it’s going to take a lot of work to persuade the rest of the Legislature that the plan released Friday is going to work and that it should pass it.

“We are an absolutely split legislative body right now. What we put forward has to represent conservative values as well as liberal values,” Rolfes said.

The main thing the bill will do is keep everybody at the table, she added. That's better than the alternative. Some lawmakers do not want to do anything, she said.

"We've got to be very thoughtful about how we move forward," Rolfes said.

DONNA BLANKINSHIP